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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to present and analyze the claims which professional American historicans, from 1880 to 1970, have made regarding the values to be derived from the study of history: 1) Develops good citizenship; this has been a persuasive theme, meaning different things to different writers; 2) Promotes patriotism. (It is interesting to note that allegations that historical study develops patriotism and good citizenship were made most often and strongly during periods of national crisis); 3) Prepares one for life as accomplished through the development of perspective and a better understanding of the present, among other things; 4) Teaches the historical methods of defining problems, developing pertinent questions, formulating and testing hypotheses, gathering and analyzing data, and reaching conclusions; 5) Develops historical mindedness, a quality deemed essential for an objective approach to issues; 6) Develops specific skills such as research, map, and other graphic skills, and critical thinking; 7) Provides a guide to action; 8) Develops better persons; and, 9) Miscellaneous values. Although historians did not always agree, nor stress the same values, nor use identical terminology, there is considerable consensus regarding the nature of their discipline and potential values to be derived from its study. (Author/JLB)

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WHY TEACH HISTORY?

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WHY TEACH HISTORY? THE VIEWS OF AMERICAN HISTORIANS

The place of history in the curricula of our schools and colleges is under attack by educators and others, and there are those who advocate or predict its elimination as a separate discipline. (47 51) While this study is not a defense for the teaching of history, it does attempt to analyze and present the claims which professional American historians have made regarding the values to be derived from the study of their discipline. It is believed that educators should attend to the question Why teach a certain subject? in addition to considering how and what to teach. Perhaps the why is the most fundamental of questions curriculum makers should raise; and certainly the scholars in any field -- in this case, the professional historians -- should be consulted.

The term professional American historian is used to refer, by and large, to college and university level teachers of history in the United States. The period covered in this inquiry is ca. 1880-1970. (34)

Developing Good Citizenship

A very pervasive theme, mentioned repeatedly by historians, is that the study of history develops good citizens. In the earliest years of the profession, as historians sought to establish a place for history in the schools, colleges, and universities, they bolstered their arguments with this allegation. An example is the assertion of Herbert Baxter Adams: "Among all the subjects of college study and college teaching, among all the means of liberal education fitting young men for civic life and public duty, not one stands higher than the Study and Teaching of History." (2)

Even after history was well established in the academic world, its value for citizenship training continued to be stressed. An examination of textbook prefaces and introductions reveals that their historian-authors often made the citizenship claim in justifying the study of history. And the claim was reiterated in each of the reports of the major committees of the American Historical Association dealing with the study and teaching of history. (4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 13) While most historians agreed that the citizenship value of history was particularly applicable at the elementary and secondary school level, still a study, in 1949, revealed that "to encourage, or equip for, good citizenship" ranked among the most frequently listed objectives of college and university departments of history. (45)

What, specifically, did historians mean by "citizenship training"? Many had in mind the necessity for educating the mass electorate. Typical is this comment by John D. Hicks:

> At least for a democracy, history is the most practical of subjects. One overstates but little to say that any democracy will function smoothly only in proportion as its history is well-taught and well-understood. (32)

Others spoke more of training the leaders of the nation. Charles Kendall Adams, for example, declared that history was "so necessary a part of a good preparation for the affairs of politics and statesmanship;" (1) and Allan Nevins warned: "The statesman should be the last person to underrate the scientific element in history, for much of his success will depend upon his proper scrutiny of it." (42)

A large number of historians viewed history as a means for acquainting individuals with the nature and function of government and with the duties, responsibilities, rights and privileges of citizenship; thereby, hopefully, inspiring them to active and constructive participation as citizens. Others saw history as an aid in the process of socialization or "Americanization," especially for aliens and newly naturalized citizens.

Still others, particularly in the second and third quarters of this century, expressed concern with good citizenship in the sense of a desirable social unity or cohesiveness. They emphasized the value of history for the transmission of our "cultural heritage" -- claiming that common or shared backgrounds and traditions serve to unify individuals. Jacques Barzun, for example, declared:

> Communication . . . is becoming more and more difficult. But words can only be defined by using other words or pointing to situations felt in common. A common background, it seems, would afford a greater chance of democratic success. It would bridge many a gap among educated men, and at the very least would make possible intelligent disagreement in good faith. (12)

In the earlier years of the profession the connotation of citizenship training was rather provincial with the emphasis on imparting knowledge necessary for active participation as citizens, thus insuring "good government" at the local, state and national levels. In recent decades, however, the connotation involved more the development of a knowledge of and a commitment to the preservation of a way of life -- to the defense of a legacy of freedom and democracy.

A number of historians agreed with Arthur E. Bestor that:

> The basic principles of our own system, the great documents of our own tradition, and the full history of our own development should be thoroughly understood, so that no man might surrender his heritage through ignorance of what it is and how it came into being. (22)

Promoting Patriotism

Another continuing claim of historians is that historical study develops patriotism. Some used the term patriotism to refer to learning the "proper place" of the United States in the history of the world; others had in mind the lessons and the inspiration to be derived from studying the lives of patriots. The meaning of patriotism for which there was greatest consensus is that of love for and pride in one's country and a readiness to make sacrifices in its best interest. This motive for historical study was, understandably, associated particularly with the study of United States or "American" history -- and resulted in considerable legislation and activity by various special interest groups.

The more extreme expressions of historians on developing patriotism came in the early decades of the profession. Jahn Bach Mc Master declared in 1898:

> We are a people animated by the highest and noblest ideals of humanity, of the rights of man, and no history of our country is rightly taught which does not set this forth . . . . (39)

Most historians, however, who favored the promotion of patriotism used qualifying words such as enlightened, rational, reasoned or informed.

An early enunciation of this qualified position was made in 1902 by Henry E. Bourne:

> Another result of the study of history should be an enlightened patriotism, or at least its intellectual counterpart, for something more than knowledge is required to make a patriot . . . . (23)

It may be significant to note that the allegations that historical study develops patriotism, and the claims for citizenship training, were made most often and most strongly during periods of national crisis -- particularly during the two world wars.

Preparation for Life

Another alleged value of the study of history is the very broad, general claim that it helps to prepare one for life. And historians, eager to promote this objective, often expressed concern over the content of their courses and its relevance to the students. Marcus W. Jernegan advocated studying those topics "which bear most directly on life, those which help most to prepare the pupils for the essential activities of life." (37) The preparation-for-life theme, emphasized particularly in the decades since the First World War, was often tied to an argument for including more "recent history" in the curriculum and was used, also, as a justification for the more general claims that history imparts valuable knowledge and affords cultural training.

Exactly how does history help to prepare one for life? First, it broadens, widens and deepens one's vision or consciousness by providing multiplied, vicarious experience. Carl Becker explained that "The development of intelligence, in the individual and the race, is in some sense a

matter of pushing back the limits of the time and space world and filling it with things that really exist and events that actually happened." (16)

Second, history contributes to a better understanding of self and of human nature in general. In 1948 Joseph R. Strayer declared that "probably the main reason for studying history" is in order to understand human behavior; (50) and Lynn White, in 1961, defined the discipline in these terms: "History is the attempt to understand human nature in all its varied capabilities and limitations through the study of all that we can know about what people have done and thought and felt." (52)

A third way that history prepares one for life lies in its relationship to other disciplines; for it was seen both as a particularly good preparation for other studies as well as a valuable synthesizing discipline, serving to connect or unify other studies and to reveal the interrelatedness of all learning.

Fourth, history helps to prepare an individual for life by developing his perspective or sense of proportion. Recent historians, particularly, emphasized this value; and Sanders' study, in 1949, revealed that third among the most frequently mentioned aims of college and university history departments was the development of the ability to see forces, movements and events "in perspective." (45)

By "perspective" historians meant the ability to see the significance of and the relationships among things and to distinguish between the old and new, the transient and the permanent. They meant a sense of direction

that permits an individual to see himself and his time and place in proper relation to other people, other times and other places. John Bell Rae stressed the ability to take the "long view of human affairs;" (44) and Arthur E. Bestor emphasized the value of learning the "limitations of contemporary judgment." (20)

A fifth way that history helps prepare one for life is by developing understanding of the present. Judged by the number of historians who mentioned this aim of historical study, it ranks high on a list of priority objectives. In 1960, John D. Hicks asserted that insofar as historians could agree on anything, "they accept the theory that the usefulness of history lies in the help it gives us in understanding the present and laying plans for the future." (33) And Sanders' study, in 1949, revealed that "To provide an understanding of the present" was the most frequently listed aim of college and university history departments. (45)

The argument that history should, above all, shed light on the present was a favorite one of the proponents of the so-called "new history" and of those historians who advocated including more "recent history" in the curricula of schools and colleges. Many historians stressed the importance of helping students make the connection between the past and the present, and Robert J. Cooke declared, in 1963:

> Unless a program of studies is functionally related to being alive in the twentieth century, in the United States and in the world, there seems to be little justification for its continued existence as a part of general education. (28)

Teaching Historical Method

Another important aim of much history teaching, and one about which historians wrote a great deal, is that of developing in students an understanding of and an ability to use the so-called "historical method." Charles Kendall Adams was one of the first historians to emphasize the "value of the search," declaring, in 1882, that "the search after truth has a value quite independent of the inherent nature of the truth sought . . . . The chief value of the study is the value of the search rather than the value of the discovery, whatever the discovery may be." (1) Louis Gottschalk reported, in 1950, that "Some have seen in this method the major, if not the only, significance of history;" (31) and evidence indicates that the number of historians stressing this reason for studying their discipline increased during the past two decades.

By "historical methods" historians generally meant those processes of identifying, defining and delimiting problems; developing pertinent questions; formulating and testing hypotheses; locating and collecting data; analyzing, evaluating and organizing information; and reaching and presenting conclusions.

An emphasis of some historians was on the value of the historical method in every day life. Charles Kendall Adams stressed this, explaining that, "The historical method is the method that must be used in the common affairs of every-day life . . . . It is the ability to grasp what may be called the strategic points of a situation by instinctive or intuitive methods." (1) Arthur M. Schlesinger, in 1931, echoes Adams'

argument that the historical method represents a way that individuals may cope in daily life with the vast amount of indirect and conflicting information from which one must draw conclusions, make decisions and act. (46)

And Arthur E. Bestor, in 1955, expressed the same essential notion:

> The problem here is much more akin to that which the citizen faces in the consideration of contemporary issues, for the available evidence is vast, the differences of opinion are marked, the danger of bias is acute, and time (as always) is fleeting. (21)

Developing Historical-Mindedness

In addition to the value of learning the historical method (usually referred to as a skill or cluster of skills), historians stressed the value of learning to be "historical-minded," by which they referred to a combination of attitudes, values and behavior patterns deemed essential for an objective approach to problems and issues. Mentioned particularly were respect for truth, for the scholarly approach and for intellectual honesty; and those attitudes associated with the development of a questioning, doubting and skeptical mind.

Skills and Critical Thinking

In the earlier decades, particularly, historians also referred to rather specific skills that the study of their discipline developed. Mentioned most were various reading and research skills; communication skills; and map, globe and other graphic skills. In later decades, however, historians spoke more of the development of critical thinking as a value resulting from historical study. By critical thinking they meant such

things as the ability to detect bias, prejudice and underlying values and assumptions; the ability to evaluate, interpret and make inferences; the ability to see many sides of issues, to separate truth from error, and fact from opinion; and the ability to recognize and guard against propaganda, slogans and over-simplifications.

A Guide to Action

Another alleged value of historical study is that knowledge of the past serves as a guide to present and future actions. An expression of this position is that of Joseph R. Strayer:

> History must be more than an adornment for the cultivated gentleman, more than a pastime for the intellectually curious, more than a tower of refuge for the skeptic and the philosopher. It must be a guide to action, not an excuse for contemplation. (49)

How did historians expect knowledge of the past to serve as a guide to action? A number emphasized the value of knowing about past failures and successes in order to avoid repeating the former and perhaps to emulate the latter. A recent expression of this notion is that of Crane Brinton, in 1950, that the "record of what men have done in the past is essential to save us today from wasting our time in blind alleys." (24)

History also serves as a guide by indicating the possible varieties, conditions and limitations of conduct and the probable outcomes of alternative courses of action. Some historians expressed the belief that its study might furnish "case histories" or "models" to serve as examples of how to deal with certain experiences in the present or future. (26, 30, 36, 38, 48)

Occasionally historians declared that knowledge of history helps to indicate what elements from the past might be retained, modified or discarded. Another point, emphasized by historians in recent decades, is that of the potentially tremendous influence which historians might exert over human conduct since "the kind of history they write, whether good or bad, helps to make history." (15)

However history might serve as a guide, historians, especially since 1940, emphasized that it was only a guide, not commanding, but perhaps suggesting trends and directions, possible courses of action and probable outcomes.

Some historians attempted to identify specific "lessons" of history or precise "laws" of human society; but most were skeptical. Most, also, concluded that prediction was not a gift of history; though they expressed the belief that knowledge of the past was valuable in helping one wisely anticipate the future.

Large numbers of historians agreed that the study of history helps in the solution of present problems. For the most part, these historians referred primarily to the fact that problems had their roots in the past and that an understanding of the background was necessarily prerequisite to formulating a wise solution. Charles A. Beard, for example, declared in 1934: "Every contemporary problem, so-called, is a product of history as actuality, has wide-ramifying roots in other problems, and can only be illuminated by reference to historical origins as conditioning forces." (14, see also 13)

A number of historians subscribed to the notion that somehow history can contribute to the creation of a better world. For the most part they referred simply to the gradual improvement in society which they expected to result from the possession of historical knowledge in general. A few, however, entertained notions of a very deliberate use of their discipline as an instrument of social action in a planned society. Most notable among the latter group were Carl Becker (16, 17, 18, 19) and Harry Elmer Barnes, (10, 11) and their position elicited considerable opposition from many of their colleagues. (25, 40, 41)

Many historians, especially in the decades since 1920, stressed the value of history for promoting a spirit of internationalism and developing an understanding of the interdependence and interrelatedness of men and nations. They viewed the teaching of their discipline as one way to foster a better, more peaceful world; and they attacked super-patriotic or ultra-nationalistic history. Page Smith epitomized this position when he urged "using history as a means of creating the true unity of mankind," and declared: "If there is an overriding theme for the century ahead, it is the unity of mankind. Such a goal cannot be served by the production of particularistic histories in which truth is submerged in legend." (48)

Develops Better Persons

Another alleged value of history is that of moral or ethical instruction, character building, and the development of values and ideals. An early expression of this idea was that of Albert Bushnell Hart, in 1892, "that

but for its ethical value history could hardly claim a place in the curriculum of the schools." (43) In 1932, Charles A. Beard, writing for the Commission on the Social Sciences in the Schools, asserted, "Insofar as social science is truly scientific it is neutral; as taught in the schools it is and must be ethical; it must make choices and emphasize values with reference to commanding standards." (13) In 1938, Allan Nevins declared that "the greatest lessons of history . . . are the moral lessons." (42) In the period after the Second World War the advocates of the use of history for moral or ethical purposes were many and vocal, while the dissenters were few. In 1958 George Barr Carson, Jr. declared:

> Historians try to transmit a concept of value. This is the best and the most everlasting thing that historians can do . . . . Historians are and should be objective in their research methods. They cannot be and should not pretend to be objective in teaching the fruits of research. (27)

Those historians who advocated the use of history to inculcate values and ideals occasionally indicated how this might be done. A favorite recommendation was that of having the historian or history teacher pass judgments and point out the evil (to be avoided) and the good (to be emulated). Some recommended that ceetain topics -- war, for example -- not be overly emphasized, but that "out ideals" be held up to the students as a goal toward which to strive. Another frequent recommendation was to dwell upon the great men and women from the past as illustrative of desirable human qualities. Some historians stressed that moral training was an indirect by-product of historical study and that simply teaching the story of the past would result in the students' recognizing and, hopefully, adhering to certain values that had stood the test of time. H. Stuart Hughes,

for example, explained that "we are not obliged either to declare our moral indifference or to hand out moral judgments right and left. If we simply do our job as historians with both conscientiousness and imagination, the ethical issues will emerge clearly enough." (35)

Miscellaneous Values

In addition to the alleged values of historical study already discussed, there are several others which historians mentioned on occasion, but which never elicited much attention, comment or support. One of these is that history creates an interest in continued study of society, its problems, and proposed solutions as well as an interest in further reading in general. Another is the intrinsic value of studying history for its own sake, and for the pleasure and personal satisfaction derived.

A few wrote of economic values to be gained -- either personally, in the world of business or commerce, or nationally as a result of improved trade relations with other parts of the world. Another economic value results from history as a cultural and tourist attraction.

Finally, two of the most obvious values or aims of historical study are the training of teachers and scholars and the pursuit of historical truth.

Summary

The concern of historians for clarifying and explaining the values of historical study is not new. From the earliest days of their profession to the present, many historians expressed the need for a reasonably specific list of objectives and values partly in order to defend a place

for their discipline in the various educational curricula and partly in the belief that teachers of history might, in fact, do a better job if the goals and values aimed for were more precisely spelled out.

Not all historians addressed themselves, at least in print, to the concern for establishing the values of their discipline. And among those who did, there were certainly disagreements, with some disclaiming the very values alleged by others. In addition, certain historians throughout the period emphasized the limitations of their discipline and the potential for its misuse.

It must be noted, however, that although historians did not always agree, nor stress the same values, nor use identical terminology, there is, in their writings, considerable consensus regarding the nature of their discipline and the potential values to be derived from its study. Most of the alleged values were mentioned throughout the period, though the emphases shifted somewhat from time to time.

Of all the values ascribed to the study of history, there were only four for which that discipline was alleged to be a sine qua non: teaching historical method, promoting historical-mindedness, developing perspective, and providing an understanding of the present. In achieving all the other potential outcomes, history plays a more or less important part in concert with other studies and experiences.

It is probably significant that the emphasis of most historians throughout the period was on the everyday value of historical study for

all people, not just on its value for those who specialize in the subject. It was repeatedly stressed that history should be useful, related to the present, and helpful in meeting the needs of the day. Most historians were, indeed, more interested in history for our sake than in history for its own sake or for the sake of the past.

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